

Integrating Soft Skills Into an Academic Curriculum

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Abstract: Technical skills are important in all industries. Most academic programs at higher education institutions focus on teaching technical skills. However, in addition to seeking candidates with strong technical skills, employers also seek candidates who have strong soft skills, such as communication, organization, and teamwork. This paper highlights the importance of soft skills and how one academic program at a four-year institution incorporates teaching soft skills into courses in the curriculum to help best prepare its graduates for the professional world.

Keywords: soft skills, curriculum development, professionalism, skill development

Each year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) publishes a list of the top skills that employers seek in job candidates (NACE, 2016). This annual list includes both soft skills and industry-specific technical skills and knowledge. Both soft and technical skills are required to be successful professionals. However, most academic programs at four-year institutions focus on teaching technical skills. This paper discusses the importance of soft skills and how one academic program at a four-year institution incorporates teaching soft skills into courses in its curriculum to help best prepare its graduates for the professional world. In addition to demonstrating the importance of soft skills, specific assignments and activities to teach soft skills from two courses in the curriculum and plans for the future are shared.

Background

According to Robles (2012), soft skills are interpersonal qualities and personal attributes. Sample soft skills include leadership, teamwork, communication, flexibility, and work ethic. Soft skills are not unique to a certain industry or discipline. These skills can be transferred from industry to industry. Though employers seek both soft and technical skills in new hires, reports have shown that recent college graduates lack some of the skills required to be successful in the workplace. A survey conducted by LEAP and the Association of American Colleges and Universities reported that 63% of employers said that graduates lacked the essential skills needed to be successful in today's global economy (Banerji, 2007). In research conducted by Farner and Brown (2008), employers reported that the skills of college graduates are not at the level needed to complete tasks required in the professional world.

Both soft skills and technical skills are critical to employees' success on the job, and the two types of skills must complement each other. Employers want employees to have strong soft skills, as well as technical skills. However, technical skills are not enough to keep individuals employed. As Lancaster and Stillman (2010) note, candidates can be good hires even if they lack some of the technical skills necessary to succeed in a position. To best prepare graduates to be

successful in the professional world, higher education institutions must prepare students to have both strong technical and soft skills.

Example of Integrating Soft Skills Into an Academic Curriculum

To help prepare students for their careers, academic programs at higher education institutions can incorporate soft skills into their courses. The construction management program at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana implements soft skills into multiple courses in its curriculum. One such course is CM 222: Technical Presentation for Construction Managers. Most students take this course in the sophomore year of their studies. Students must complete core curriculum courses in Rhetoric and Writing and Fundamentals of Public Speaking as prerequisites for CM 222. The course covers various topics that pertain to communication in the construction industry, such as presentation skills, business writing, phone skills, meeting minutes, and interviewing skills. In addition to teaching these industry-specific communication skills, the course includes lectures and activities to teach several other soft skills including organization, time management, and problem solving.

Organization is imperative in the construction industry. In their professional careers in construction, graduates from this academic program will be responsible for multiple job responsibilities on a daily basis and could even be helping to manage several large-scale construction projects simultaneously. To help teach organization skills, students in CM 222 are introduced to a variety of methods to help stay organized. Due to the increased use of technology and course management systems used in higher education, many students do not have a developed system for how to stay organized and ensure that they meet deadlines. The organization systems presented in CM 222 are planners and notebooks, electronic calendars, and sticky notes. Examples of how alumni from the Ball State construction management program use these various organization systems are shared, so students have actual examples of how these systems are used in industry. Students are encouraged to develop these organization systems in their collegiate careers so they can start their professional careers with an established way to stay organized to help assist with their transition from college to career.

In addition to teaching organization skills, communication skills are taught continuously throughout the semester in CM 222. Two specific topics related to communications skills that are integrated into the course are email etiquette and phone skills. Lectures about each topic are first shared with the class. For email etiquette, students review various scenarios experienced by either interns or alumni from the construction management program. Students work in pairs to write appropriate emails in response to these scenarios. For phone skills, students have the opportunity to role play various scenarios with their classmates. Like the email etiquette scenarios, the phone skills scenarios are actual examples experienced by either interns or alumni from the construction management program. After both in-class exercises, the students come back together as an entire group to discuss and debrief about their experiences working on these activities.

Soft skills are also incorporated into the curriculum in CM 460: Capstone in Construction. Capstone in Construction is the final course for seniors in the construction management curriculum. In this course, students work in teams for the duration on the semester on the project

management components of an actual recent construction project in Indiana. Teamwork is imperative in the construction industry. Multi-million- or multi-billion-dollar construction projects cannot be completed by one person. After graduation, students will constantly work in project teams throughout their professional careers. Having students work in the same teams for a five-month semester during CM 460 helps simulate the experience of working with the same project team for months or even years in industry. Though all the course assignments in CM 460 require teamwork, one particular assignment, the mock bid, is specifically designed to help students further develop their teamwork skills and understand the importance of teamwork. The mock bid simulates a competitive bid, which is how many projects are awarded to companies in the construction industry. In a timeframe of two hours, students receive five bid packets, three caveats, and other information that simulates a bid in real time. Due to the time constraints and the large number of bids included in this exercise, teams must work well together to successfully complete the bid on time. Deadlines are critical in construction, and as in industry, no late bids are accepted during the mock bid. Prior to the actual bid day, teams are encouraged to develop a plan and a system to stay organized for this activity. Not all teams are successful in submitting the bid on time and in the correct format. Receiving a zero on this assignment helps reinforce the importance of working together effectively to complete a project. At the mock bid opening, after all of the bids have been opened and recorded, the course instructor debriefs the activity with the students to discuss what strategies worked well, how the teams could have improved, and what the teams learned about themselves that can be applied for the remainder of the semester.

Plans for the Future

Informal feedback from students about the various assignments and activities in the courses highlighted in this article has been positive. To help students further develop these soft skills, new exercises will be developed and included in these courses in the future.

One strategy to incorporate into CM 222 in the future is to have alumni assist with the phone skills activity. Students will be paired with alumni to role play using preassigned scenarios. Incorporating alumni will help students develop their construction network and will give them feedback on their phone skills from actual professionals in the industry.

One strategy to incorporate into CM 460 in the future to further teach teamwork is to have alumni participate in the mock bid exercise. Alumni would be invited to campus to observe the mock bid. At the bid opening, alumni would share their observations to offer feedback as to how the groups could have worked more effectively as a team. In addition, an alumni team would be created to participate in the mock bid. During the debriefing, the alumni team would reinforce the importance of teamwork and share how their group worked together during the exercise. Alumni would also relate their experiences from participating in actual competitive bids in the construction industry.

In addition to adding new exercises into these existing courses in the future, developing a new technical elective related to soft skills is another strategy to help students further develop soft skills. As part of the construction management curriculum at Ball State University, students must complete seven hours of technical elective credit. A soft skills technical elective could provide

further information about various soft skills and allow students additional opportunities to further develop and practice these skills.

Conclusion

The course examples shared in this article are a select representation of ways that soft skills are integrated into one academic curriculum at a higher education institution. Many soft skills, such as teamwork, communication, and leadership, are taught both directly and indirectly in multiple other courses through assignments like group projects and in class discussions.

Since employers place an emphasis on soft skills in the professional world, it is imperative that higher education institutions think of ways to integrate these skills into their curricula, so students are prepared to be successful in their professional careers.

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